



Michigan Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Network

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Sarah Redmond and Kate Warner, Co-Chairs

TESTIMONY ON THE NEED FOR PUBLIC DEFENSE REFORM

**MICHIGAN STATE HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE
Honorable Representative Mark Meadows, Chairman**

**Submitted by Randy Block, Director
Michigan Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Network
December 14, 2009**

Thank you Representative Meadows and members of the House Judiciary Committee for holding this hearing on such an important issue.

My name is Randy Block and I am the Director of the Michigan Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Network. Our organization is a member of the Campaign for Justice. We support legislative reform of Michigan's public defense delivery system.

The mission of our organization, founded in 2002, is to foster the worth and dignity of people by promoting social justice and community service. Unitarian Universalists seek to live by the following principles that frame our testimony today: affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person; working for justice, equity and compassion in human relations; and promoting a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. We seek to organize over 1,000 activists, most of whom are members of 26 Unitarian Universalist congregations across the State of Michigan, to be voices for progressive change with their elected officials.

The right to effective defense representation is promised by our nation's constitution to everyone – regardless of how much money one has or where one lives. It is a sad fact that 75% of Michigan citizens believe that in Michigan's criminal justice system, a rich person gets better treatment than a poor person (Marketing Resource Group poll, September 2007). We have a lot of work to do in order to truly have a justice system that works for all. Improving our state's public defense system is one necessary way to do that. Every person deserves to have the guiding hand of effective counsel when accused of a crime. Being a compassionate, just and equitable society must mean that we uphold the basic fundamental rights for every person in our community, from all walks of life, especially including those who have the least among us.

Picture being accused of something, not being familiar with the justice system, and only meeting with your court appointed attorney a few minutes before a trial. Imagine that the attorney handling your case is either just out of law school or hasn't had the training for your specific case because there are no consistent training or qualification standards. Imagine that your attorney has such a huge caseload that despite his or her best intentions, he or she cannot spend enough time to provide a solid defense. I'm sure this is not the kind of representation you would want for a nephew, or a neighbor, or an uncle, but it is what is happening every day in Michigan's courts.

I also find it striking that only 14 percent of Michigan citizens have a great deal of confidence that the Michigan criminal justice system is ensuring that the innocent are set free and the guilty are convicted. I have been appalled by the real life stories of individuals in Michigan who have been sentenced to long prison sentences for crimes they were later found innocent of through DNA and other scientific evidence.

Those stories, like Walter Swift's, are so shocking not just because of the injustice done to the individual and to his family, but also because in many situations, the real perpetrator has never been found or tried in court. Is this the kind of justice or public safety that we want for our communities? With public safety being a top issue in so many communities, we need a public defense system that prevents injustices like this and promotes public safety.

I hope that you'll think about these issues as you consider legislation that would improve public defense in Michigan. A system with adequate state funding, which meets and enforces national standards, is what we need. I urge you to support reform legislation. Thank you for your time and consideration. For more information, contact Randy Block at 248-549-5170

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